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# The Influence of Personal, Relational, and Contextual Factors on Forgiveness Communication Following Transgressions in Romantic Relationships

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THE INFLUENCE OF PERSONAL, RELATIONAL, AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS  
ON FORGIVENESS COMMUNICATION FOLLOWING TRANSGRESSIONS IN  
ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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Bachelor of Arts in Communication and Journalism and Promotional Communication

Cleveland State University

May 2013

submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

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at the

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May 2015

We hereby approve this thesis for

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Candidate for the Master of Arts in Applied Communication Theory & Methodology  
degree

for the

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my beautiful wife, Karissa, whose constant encouragement and support made all of this possible. Thank you for your patience and help through all of the long frustrating nights. I am truly blessed to have you in my life and I love you more with each passing day.

I would also like to thank my mother, Darlene, for teaching me the value of hard work and dedication and for always believing in me.

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THE INFLUENCE OF PERSONAL, RELATIONAL, AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS  
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ABSTRACT

The way that individuals adapt to stress in their romantic relationships plays a major role in determining how satisfied they are in those relationships. This study used the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model as a framework to examine how individuals adapt to the stressful event of a relational transgression in their romantic relationships. This study specifically looked at the effect of individuals' attachment dimensions and the equity of their relationships as factors that influenced how they used forgiveness strategies after a relational transgression occurred. The results of the study revealed that there was a significant negative relationship between the explicit strategy and dismissiveness, a significant positive relationship between the minimizing strategy and preoccupation, a significant positive relationship between the non-verbal strategy and preoccupation, a significant negative relationship between the non-verbal strategy and fear of intimacy, and a significant negative relationship between the conditional strategy and security/confidence and fear of intimacy. The results also revealed that there were significant group differences between equity groups and three of the five forgiveness strategies. The results also showed that there were significant relationships between transgression severity and four of the five forgiveness strategies. Finally, the results revealed that there was a significant relationship between relational satisfaction and three of the five forgiveness strategies.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Social relationships provide an array of benefits for individuals, including both physical and mental health. House, Landis, and Umberson (1988) reported that social relationships have just as much of an impact on physical health as physical activity, blood pressure, obesity, and smoking. One of the major reasons why social relationships are beneficial for an individual's health is the presence of social support. Social support is defined as "the mesh of social relationships and transactions whose function is to complete personal resources to allow adaptive coping in situations of need" (Marin & Garcia-Ramirez, 2005, p. 97). Social support has been shown to reduce stress (Haas, 2002), improve cardiac health (Janevic, Janz, Dodge, Wang, Lin & Clark, 2004), and reduce anxiety and depression (Hays, Turner, & Coates, 1992). The positive impacts provided by social support on both physical and mental health underscore the value of social relationships for the individual. The benefits of being in a social relationship vary based on the type of relationship. Burleson (2013) demonstrated that romantic partnerships provide protective functions concerning health, and Qualls (2014) argued that romantic partners are able to offer the widest range of social support because of the

amount of integration they have in each other's lives. Social support has been demonstrated to serve multiple functions. For example, one of the most frequent forms of social support comes in the form of emotional support, which is characterized by expression of care and concern (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003). Other forms of social support include esteem support, which is characterized by attempting to help someone enhance how they feel about themselves (Holmstrom and Burleson, 2011), informational support (MacGeorge, Feng, & Thomson, 2008), and instrumental support (Tardy, 1994). While many types of social relationships can provide various types of social support, romantic relationships differentiate themselves by being able to provide multiple forms of social support including emotional, instrumental, and esteem (Qualls, 2014). When individuals are faced with stressful events they are more likely to desire support from their romantic partners (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994). Based on the relationship between social support, romantic relationships, and overall health, this study focused on romantic relationships when it came to examining factors that impacted individuals' adaptation to stressful situations, specifically relational transgressions.

Relational transgressions are an inherent part of any relationship (Fink, 1968). A relational transgression is defined as "an untoward behavior from a relational partner that is perceived as a violation of relational rules" (Metts & Cupach, 2007, p. 244). According to Metts (1994), as a relationship develops partners take for granted that the rules of the relationship will be followed and even valued. But this sense of security in the relationship often leads to relational partners being hurt by relational transgressions (Morse & Metts, 2011). After a relational transgression occurs there are numerous ways, both constructive and destructive, with which to manage it. For example, a destructive

means of managing a relational transgression is through anger and revenge. However, a more constructive way of managing a relational transgression is through forgiveness.

The concept of forgiveness is a fundamental part of any interpersonal relationship (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). Forgiveness is defined as “a set of motivational changes, whereby one becomes decreasingly motivated to retaliate against and maintain estrangement from an offending relationship partner and increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill for the offender, despite the offender’s hurtful actions” (McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal, 1997, p. 321-322). The motivation to forgive is driven by several factors, including relational commitment, love, empathy, emotional involvement, and the fear of losing one’s partner (Kelley, 1998).

It is important to examine forgiveness from a communication perspective because the communication of forgiveness has a major impact on numerous communication and relational outcomes. McCullough et al (1997) proposed that people have a natural tendency to want to either flee or fight when they are hurt by their partners, also known as the fight or flight response. The flight tendency is characterized by a desire to avoid the other person to reduce negative affect, while the fight tendency is characterized by a desire to seek revenge and retaliate. However, neither of these responses is considered constructive. A constructive response to a hurtful event occurs when the victim is not motivated by avoidance or revenge, but rather is willing to communicate forgiveness in an attempt to repair the relationship.

According to Bachman and Guerrero (2006) the communication of forgiveness leads to an increased use of conciliatory communication such as relational repair tactics, which are strategies used to enhance the relationship, and integrative communication,

which involves talking about feelings in a non-threatening way in an attempt to solve a problem. The goal of communicating forgiveness is often to repair the current relationship, but repair doesn't always happen. Metts and Cupach (2007) argue, even though forgiveness does not always lead to relational repair, it can lead to the victim viewing the transgression in a positive light and may help in subsequent relationships.

Given the important role that communication plays in relational repair following transgressions, this study examines forgiveness communication from the perspective of the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (VSA). The VSA argues that specific vulnerabilities, stressors, and adaptations (communication strategies) impact important relational outcomes (e.g. relational satisfaction). The next section reviews the VSA and explains how specific vulnerabilities and stressors are expected to impact the communication strategies individuals use to grant forgiveness following a relational transgression.

## CHAPTER II

### VULNERABILITY-STRESS-ADAPTATION MODEL

The vulnerability-stress-adaptation model provides a framework for explaining how marriages change over time (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Though developed to understand marital relationships, scholars have applied the VSA to non-marital relationship as well (e.g., Sheldon, Gilchrist-Petty, & Lessley, 2014). The model examines how individual differences (i.e., vulnerabilities) and situational factors (i.e., stressors) influence partner interactions. Connections between these individual differences and situational factors lead to changes in relationship satisfaction and stability (Langer, Lawrence, & Barry, 2008) (See Figure 1). The components of the model, and their relationship, are further articulated next.

The VSA argues that individuals bring preexisting and enduring vulnerabilities into their relationships, which can include the individual's personality traits or background (Langer et al., 2008). Karney and Bradbury (1995) define enduring vulnerabilities as “the stable demographical, historical, personality, and experiential factors that individuals bring to marriage” (p. 22). Examples of vulnerabilities

include level of education, personality traits, and parental divorce (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Furthermore, vulnerabilities can also extend to past and current relationship issues that might impact the communication in, and quality of, a romantic relationship. The VSA argues that vulnerabilities impact individuals' interpretations of the next component in the model, which are stressors (or stressful events).

Karney and Bradbury (1995) define stressful events as “the developmental transitions, situations, incidents, and chronic or acute circumstances that spouses and couples encounter” (p. 22). The VSA argues that individuals will face some type of stressful event in their relationship. Though stressful events are often the products of chance (i.e., unemployment, and increase in workload) (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), they can also be a product of the enduring vulnerabilities individuals bring to the relationship (e.g., prior relational transgressions) (Sheldon et al., 2014). For example, Poulton and Andrews (1992) found that personality traits are related to the frequency of stressful events while Marco and Suis (1993) found that negative affectivity is related to viewing life events as more stressful. Thus, individuals' enduring vulnerabilities (i.e., individual differences and life experiences) have a direct impact on how they experience stress. Karney and Bradbury (1995) also assert that enduring vulnerabilities play a major role in how individuals adapt to stressful events or circumstances.

Adaptations represents the final predictor in the VSA. Karney and Bradbury (1995) define adaptations as “the ways individuals and couples contend with differences of opinion and individual or marital difficulties and transitions” (p. 22). From a communication perspective, scholars examine the impact that stressful events (or stressors) have on communication within relationships. For example, Bolger, DeLongis,

Kessler, and Wethington,( 1989) reported that couples were more likely to report negative interactions with each other when one or both of the partners had particularly stressful days. In line with the arguments of the VSA, Bolger et al's (1989) findings indicate that stressful events external to the couple (e.g., work-related stress) can have a negative effect on adaptations within the relationship (i.e. communication). Further, a couple's ability to adapt to stressful events or circumstances is greatly impacted by the enduring vulnerabilities of the partners. For example, Franz, McClelland, and Weinberger (1991) reported that children whose parents were in a distressed or dissolved marriage had poorer social skills as adults.

Finally, the way that couples communicatively adapt to stressful events impacts relational outcomes such as relationship satisfaction. Langer et al. (2008) assert that “links among vulnerabilities, stressors, and behaviors, both adaptive and maladaptive, are expected to lead to changes in marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction and, ultimately marital stability and instability” (p. 756). In short, the VSA model argues that vulnerabilities directly impact stress, adaptations, and relational outcomes, and stress and vulnerabilities impact relational outcomes indirectly through adaptive processes (See Figure 1). Applying the VSA, the goal of this study is to examine the communication of forgiveness as an adaptation in response to different vulnerabilities and stressors following a relational transgression. The following sections introduce forgiveness communication as an adaptive process and explain the specific vulnerabilities and stressors that are expected to impact the communication of forgiveness (i.e., adaptation) and how communication will impact relational satisfaction (See Figure 2 for adaptation of VSA model for this study).

## 2.1 Forgiveness Communication as an Adaptive Process

In response to a stressful event or circumstance, specifically a relational transgression, the communication of forgiveness is a particularly important adaptation. However, traditionally forgiveness research has focused on non-communication related variables. Waldron and Kelley (2005) reviewed the existing forgiveness literature and found “all of these studies have in common an emphasis on the individual feelings and cognitions associated with forgiveness, rather than communicative behaviors used to provoke, express or manage them” (p. 724). In other words, Waldron and Kelley (2005) found that the research examined *why* individuals forgive (i.e., motivations), but there was no information on *how* individuals forgive (i.e., communication strategies). In response to the lack of research on the communication of forgiveness, Waldron and Kelley (2005) conceptualized three distinct forms of communication that individuals might engage in to express their forgiveness to a relational partner: direct, indirect, and conditional.

To begin, *direct forgiveness* occurs when individuals clearly and directly tell their partner that they are forgiven. Direct forgiveness constitutes two strategies, discussion and explicit. First, *discussion* is a strategy that individuals use to explain how and why the offense occurred and to express their feelings about the offense. The discussion strategy may also involve renegotiating the rules of the relationship. Second, the *explicit strategy* is characterized by a clear and concise message of forgiveness (Waldron & Kelley, 2005) such as “I forgive you.” Kelley (1998) didn’t originally have subcategories within direct forgiveness, but Scobie and Scobie (1998) argued that there was a clear distinction between the explicit and discussion strategies because the explicit strategy



tended to give a sense of finality to forgiveness, whereas the discussion strategy tended to foster more conversation about motives and emotional reactions.

Next, *indirect forgiveness* occurs when individuals do not directly tell their partner that they are forgiven, but rather forgiveness is supposed to be understood. Victims often use indirect strategies when they feel that preserving the relationship is more important than solving the problem. The indirect form is comprised of the nonverbal strategy and the minimizing strategy. The *nonverbal strategy* is characterized by forgiving the other person through actions rather than words (e.g. hugging) (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). The nonverbal strategy can also be used to indicate that there is nothing to forgive (Exline & Baumeister, 2000) or as a way of avoiding confrontation. The *minimizing strategy* is used to indicate that the transgression was not important. Individuals might choose this strategy when they don't wish to put a lot of energy into fixing the problem or if they don't wish to embarrass or humiliate their partner (Waldron & Kelley, 2005).

Finally, *conditional forgiveness* occurs when the victim forgives the transgressor, but attaches stipulations to the forgiveness. Conditional forgiveness is typically granted through an if/then statement (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). For example, an individual granting conditional forgiveness might say something like "if you don't do that again, then I will forgive you" (Waldron & Kelley, 2005, p. 726).

The way that individuals adapt to a stressor or stressful event is dependent upon the enduring vulnerabilities they bring into their relationship (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Thus, it is reasonable to predict that the enduring vulnerabilities individuals bring into

their relationship would have an impact on the way they communicate forgiveness to their partner.

## **2.2 Vulnerabilities that Impact Forgiveness Communication**

As mentioned previously enduring vulnerabilities are “stable demographical, historical, personality, and experiential factors that individuals bring to marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1995, p. 22). Vulnerabilities impact the way individuals communicate within their relationships and influences how they interpret stressful events and ultimately how they adapt to challenges in their relationship as outlined by the VSA. Two vulnerabilities that are particularly relevant to forgiveness are attachment and equity. Attachment is an individual based vulnerability that is brought into the relationship. Attachment is an important vulnerability to study because as Karney and Bradbury (1995) assert “stable personal characteristics such as attachment can contribute to the stressful events to which couples must adapt and can affect how well couples adapt to individual and marital difficulties” (p. 23). Equity is a relationally based vulnerability that is based on an individual’s history with his or her partner. Morse and Metts (2011) assert that equity theory provides a useful framework with which to examine the role of relational history in terms of transgressions and forgiveness. Thus, the current study examines the vulnerabilities of attachment and equity in regards to the adaptation of forgiveness.

## **2.3 Attachment.**

Bowlby (1977) originally conceptualized attachment theory to explain the many types of emotional distress experienced by infants at the unwilling separation from their primary caregiver. Attachment is defined as “an enduring affective bond between

particular individuals” (Bartholomew, 1990, p. 149). Bowlby (1977) argued that the goal of the attachment system is to maintain a sense of physical closeness to the primary caretaker in order to protect an individual from danger. This need for attachment is said to begin at infancy and is based on feelings of security in periods of distress. Bowlby (1977) created a three category model including secure attachment, anxious-resistant insecure attachment, and anxious-avoidant insecure attachment to describe how infants dealt with the experience of being separated from their primary caretaker.

According to Bowlby (1973), the three infant attachment styles are based on working models of self and other. A working model is defined as an “internal representation of one’s self or others, which provide the foundation for later personality organization” (Bartholomew, 1990, p. 152). Working models of self and other created during childhood play a major role in individual’s attachment experiences as an adult. Attachment is originally formed towards a primary caregiver and is then expanded to include other people such as friends, siblings, and romantic partners in life (Guerrero, Farinelli, & McEwan, 2009). As a child grows up, their interactions with their primary caretaker shape their attachment style, which becomes a prototype for how they interact with people outside of their family. This leads to the formation of attachment styles, which are defined as “relatively coherent and stable patterns of emotion and behavior that are exhibited in close relationships” (Shaver, Collins, & Clark, 1996, p. 25).

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) created a four-category model of adult attachment by crossing the dimensions (i.e., positive/negative) of self and other. *Security/confidence* is characterized by individuals that have a positive model of self and other. Secures value both intimacy (i.e., interdependence) and autonomy (i.e.,

independence) (Guerrero et al., 2009). *Pre-occupation* is characterized by a negative model of self and a positive model of others (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011). Pre-occupieds tend to have low self-esteem and a fear that others will abandon them. *Dismissiveness* is characterized by a positive model of self and a negative model of others. Dismissives tend to have high self-esteem, but they tend to be overly independent and avoid intimacy (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). *Fear of intimacy* is characterized by individuals who have a negative model of both self and others (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). Fearful-avoidants tend to have low self-esteem and a fear of intimacy and commitment.

Attachment theory provides a theoretical basis for understanding forgiveness. Lawler-Row, Younger, Piferi, and Jones (2006) assert that “the attachment system becomes activated in situations that threaten the relationship, such as anxiety over potential separation and conflict” (p. 494). As such, an individual’s attachment system has important implications for how they respond to a relational transgression. After a transgression occurs, the victim has to realize that his or her partner has both positive and negative capabilities in order for forgiveness to occur (Flanigan, 1998). Forgiveness is also facilitated by feeling of empathy toward the transgressor (McCullough et al., 1997). Lawler-Row et al. (2006) demonstrated that secure individuals may be better equipped to forgive because they have less idealized and more flexible views of their partners than insecure. Furthermore, Lawler-Row et al. (2006) found that secure individuals reported more trait and state forgiveness than insecure, and that insecure individuals reported a stronger desire to avoid the transgressor after a betrayal.

The way that individuals view both themselves and others may play a role in determining how they forgive. For example, Kachadourian, Fincham, and Davila (2004)

revealed that individuals with a positive view of both self and other had a greater tendency to forgive their partner after a transgression. Kachadourian et al. (2004) assert that this is the case because individuals with high self-worth tend to not fear rejection from others. As secures also have a positive view of others, they tend to make more positive attributions about others, thus potentially causing them to be more willing to forgive and to communicate forgiveness in particular ways. For instance, secure individuals tend to be more compromising and use more problem solving strategies (Pistole, 1989). Secures also tend to find their partners trustworthy and dependable because of their positive view of others. As the discussion based forgiveness strategy is conceptually similar to interactive strategies in relationship repair (Emmers & Canary, 1996) security/confidence is predicted to demonstrate a positive relationship with the discussion forgiveness strategy. Based on the tendency of secures to find their partners trustworthy and dependable it is also possible that they will use indirect strategies to indicate that there is really nothing to forgive. Based on the tendency for security/confidence to be related to relationship satisfaction and the negative relationship between the conditional strategy and relationship satisfaction (Sheldon et al., 2014) security/confidence is predicted to have a negative relationship with the conditional strategy.

Fear of intimacy is characterized by feelings of unworthiness and mistrust. Fearful avoidants feel as if they are unworthy of love, but at the same time they desperately want to be loved. Fearful avoidants also have a fear of abandonment and rejection by their partners. As the minimizing strategy is often utilized when preserving the relationship is viewed as more important than solving the problem (Waldron & Kelley, 2005) it is

proposed that minimizing and nonverbal strategies will have a positive relationship with fear of intimacy. Based on fearful-avoidants tendency to fear abandonment, it seems unlikely that they would utilize the conditional strategy out of fear that they would damage their relationship.

Dismissiveness is characterized by high self-esteem and a mistrust of others. Dismissives tend to feel that relationships are relatively unimportant while placing a high value on themselves. As dismissives tend to already mistrust their partner and feel as if they aren't essential, it is proposed that the conditional strategy will have a positive relationship with dismissiveness.

Preoccupation is characterized by low self-esteem and an almost idolization of others. Preoccupieds fear of being abandoned by a partner they so desperately need would seem to indicate that they would be more likely to use an indirect strategy of forgiveness in an attempt to preserve the relationship. But on the other hand, the destruction of their idealization of their partner could make it difficult for preoccupieds to forgive. Ultimately, it is predicted that preoccupieds would likely use indirect strategies in an attempt to protect their relationship.

H<sup>1</sup>: The discussion strategy will have a positive relationship with security/confidence and a negative relationship with preoccupation, dismissiveness, and fear of intimacy

H<sup>2</sup>: The explicit strategy will have a positive relationship with security/confidence and preoccupation and a negative relationship with dismissiveness and fear of intimacy

H<sup>3</sup>: The minimizing strategy will have a positive relationship with security/confidence, preoccupation, and fear of intimacy and a negative relationship with dismissiveness

H<sup>4</sup>: The nonverbal strategy will have a positive relationship with security/confidence, preoccupation, and fear of intimacy and a negative relationship with dismissiveness

H<sup>5</sup>: Conditional forgiveness will have a positive relationship with dismissiveness and a negative relationship with security/confidence, preoccupation, and fear of intimacy

## **2.4 Equity**

Equity is defined as “the perceived balance between the partner’s contributions and benefits or consequences” (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). The concept of equity is often examined through the lens of the equity theory. The equity theory argues that individuals desire to maximize their outcomes while minimizing their consequences. In other words, individuals seek to gain the most benefit out of a relationship while reducing the costs. The equity theory also proposes that maximizing one’s outcomes is achieved through equitable relationships (Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973). A relationship is considered to be equitable when one partner believes that the ratio of the amount he or she is putting into and getting out of the relationship is equal to the amount that his or her partner is putting into and getting out of the relationship (Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne, & Hay, 1985).

When this ratio isn’t equal the relationship is considered to be inequitable. Individuals who are receiving more than they are putting into the relationship are

considered to be over-benefitted while individuals who putting more into the relationship than they are receiving in return are considered to be under-benefitted (Dainton, 2003). Sprecher (1986) asserts that there are both positive and negative emotions associated with being under-benefitted or over-benefitted, but that being under-benefitted was a much stronger predictor of emotion than being over-benefitted. Hatfield et al. (1985) argues that under-benefitted individuals tend to feel less content than both equitable and over-benefitted individuals, but that both under-benefitted and under-benefitted individuals reported being less satisfied in their relationship than individuals in equitable relationships.

Both over-benefitted and under-benefitted individuals experience negative emotions, but the type and level of negative emotions felt are different. Individuals who are under-benefitted tend to feel more negative emotions than individuals who are over-benefitted because they are not enjoying the benefits of the relationship as much as the over-benefitted individual (Canary & Stafford, 1992). Individuals who are under-benefitted tend to experience feelings of depression and frustration while individuals who are over-benefitted tend to experience feelings of guilt (Sprecher, 2001a). Under-benefitted individuals tend to feel frustrated and depressed because they feel as if they are putting more into the relationship than they are getting out. This leads to them feeling as if the relationship is unfair. Over-benefitted individuals tend to feel guilty because the relationship is perceived to be unfair, but it is unfair in their favor. This may not lead to them feeling frustrated because they are enjoying the benefits of the relationship, but it is certainly understandable that they would feel guilt because they are essentially taking advantage of their partner. As the level of inequity in the relationship increases the level



of the partner's distress will increase as well. As inequity and distress increase the strength with which at least one of the partner's will attempt to restore equity to the relationship will increase as well (Hatfield & Traupmann, 1981).

A relational transgression can upset the balance between inputs and outputs within a relationship, thus leading to major implications in terms of equity. A relational transgression could make the transgressor feel as if they are being overbenefitted because they feel as if they are indebted to their partner. On the other hand, the victim may feel as if they are being underbenefitted because their partner has done something that violates the rules of their relationship (Morse & Metts, 2011).

Forgiveness also plays a major role in equity because forgiveness can be viewed as a way of potentially restoring equity to an inequitable relationship (Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1983). A study by Westerman (2013) found that overbenefitted individuals were more likely to forgive than underbenefitted individuals. This is likely because overbenefitted individuals tend to feel guilty about receiving more than they are giving and see forgiveness as a way of restoring equity to the relationship. This may lead to overbenefitted individuals being quick to forgive in an attempt to alleviate some of their guilt. Conversely, underbenefitted individuals tend to feel angry about putting more into the relationship than they are receiving. Thus, it would make sense for them to be unlikely to forgive because they feel like forgiving their partner will make the relationship even more inequitable. This may lead to underbenefitted individuals setting conditions upon forgiveness in an attempt to restore equity to the relationship.

H<sup>6</sup>: There will be differences in the use of the discussion strategy among equity groups.

H<sup>7</sup>: There will be differences in the use of the explicit strategy among equity groups.

H<sup>8</sup>: There will be differences in the use of the minimizing strategy among equity groups.

H<sup>9</sup>: There will be differences in the use of the nonverbal strategy among equity groups.

H<sup>10</sup>: There will be differences in the use of the conditional strategy among equity groups.

According to the VSA, the way individuals handle stress within a relationship is dependent upon that enduring vulnerabilities they bring into that relationship. Karney and Bradbury (1995) assert that enduring vulnerabilities contribute to stressful life events and circumstances couples encounter. For this reason, Karney and Bradbury (1995) recommend that vulnerabilities and stress be studied in conjunction within each other to determine their effects on adaptations and relational outcomes. A stressor that is particularly relevant to the adaptation of the communication of forgiveness is the severity of a transgression.

## CHAPTER III

### STRESS AND ADAPTATIONS

#### **3.1 Stress: Transgression Severity**

Transgression severity is defined as the amount of negative affect a victim experiences after a relational offense (Merolla, 2008). Transgression severity is considered to be a subjective evaluation because “transgression severity depends on numerous factors, including the ambiguity of the offense, perceived intention, history of past offensive behavior, and relational values of the perceiver” (Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2000, p. 127) When a transgression is perceived as particularly severe it can be quite damaging to a relationship. As the severity of the transgression increases the likelihood of intense hurt and anger increases as well (McCullough, M. E., Rachal, K.C., Sandage, S. J., Worthington, E.L., Jr., Brown, S. W., & Hight, T. L., 1998).

The severity of a transgression plays a major role in forgiveness. According to Kelley and Waldron (2005) “if anything seems certain in the developing forgiveness literature, it is that the severity of a transgression will be a major factor in shaping the

partner's responses" (p. 344). If the transgression is considered severe enough to be unforgivable (Backman, 1985) or causes the victim to question the advisability of staying in the relationship (Worthington & Wade, 1999) the transgression can directly lead to negative relational outcomes. Furthermore, perceived transgression severity influences how couples adapt following a transgression. Waldron and Kelley (2005) argue that "the severity of an offense or the magnitude of its perceived consequences, shape the communicative response of the offended party" (p. 727). In the context of this study, the severity of the transgression will likely impact the strategies that individuals use to communicate forgiveness.

Previous research on transgression severity and forgiveness communication produced mixed findings regarding the use of indirect strategies. Specifically, Merolla (2008) revealed that indirect forgiveness was frequently used in response to severe transgressions whereas Waldron and Kelley (2005) found indirect communication was rarely used in response to severe transgressions. A study by Sheldon et al. (2014) found a significant negative relationship between transgression severity and the nonverbal and minimizing strategies and a significant positive relationship with the discussion and conditional strategies. The explicit strategy also had a negative relationship with transgression severity, but the results were insignificant. Previous research led to the predictions:

H<sup>11</sup>: Transgression severity will have a negative relationship with the nonverbal strategy, the minimizing strategy, and the explicit strategy, and a positive relationship with the discussion strategy and the conditional strategy.

### **3.2 Relationship Satisfaction**

Relationship satisfaction is one of the most widely studied variables in the field of communication. Numerous studies have drawn a connection between relationship satisfaction and attachment. Collins and Read (1990) found that positive views of self and others was related to satisfaction in dating relationships while Kobak and Hazan (1991) and Feeney, Noller, and Callan (1994) found the same association in marital relationships. The relationship between equity and relationship satisfaction is well established as well. Equity theory was first connected to variations in relationship satisfaction by Hatfield et al., in 1985 with Sprecher (2001b) and VanYperen and Buunk (1990) finding that equity was positively related to relationship satisfaction.

A relationship also exists between relationship satisfaction and forgiveness. A study by Sheldon et al. (2014) revealed marital satisfaction was related to the tendency to forgive in married relationships. Sheldon et al.'s study also revealed that relationship satisfaction had a positive relationship with the nonverbal and minimizing strategies in married couples and a positive relationship with the explicit strategy in dating couples. The results also revealed that relationship satisfaction had a negative relationship with the conditional strategy in both married and dating couples. Therefore, based on previous research it is proposed that:

H<sup>12</sup>: Relationship satisfaction will have a positive relationship with the nonverbal, minimizing, discussion, and explicit strategies and a negative relationship with the conditional strategy.

## CHAPTER IV

### METHODS

#### **4.1 Participants**

The sample included 212 individuals who reported being in a current romantic relationship. The sample consisted of 157 (74.1%) women and 54 (25.5%) men. The mean age of the participants was 27.34 years ( $SD = 10.37$ , Range = 18 to 65). The majority of the sample was White, not Hispanic or Latino (69.3%,  $n = 147$ ), and the majority of participants self-identified as Heterosexual or Straight (86.3%,  $n = 183$ ). Approximately 50% of participants ( $n = 111$ ) reported being in a dating relationship, whereas approximately 34% of participants were in a marital relationship ( $n = 71$ ). The mean relationship length of the sample was 64.49 months ( $SD = 90.69$ , Range = 1 to 453).

#### **4.2 Procedures**

Individuals were recruited to participate in this study using two techniques. First, communication students were recruited from a Midwestern university, provided information regarding the study and informed consent, and given the opportunity to earn

extra credit (per instructor consent) by participating in the study or by recruiting a qualified participant. Second, participants were recruited by advertising the research opportunity via the authors' social media pages. All participants completed the survey online and they were instructed to complete the survey in private. To qualify for participation, individuals had to be 18 years of age or older and be in a current romantic relationship or have had prior experience in a romantic relationship.

#### **4.3 Measures**

Participants completed a series of scaled items to measure the variables of interest in this study. All measures are briefly discussed next. Negatively keyed items were reverse coded so that higher values indicate greater endorsement of each variable. Table 2 presents scale means, standard deviations, and reliability coefficients for all measured variables. See Appendix 1 for a complete report of all scale items contained in the measures reported next.

**Attachment.** Attachment dimensions were measured using a 27-item scale developed from research by Feeney, Noller, and Hanrahan (1994) and Guerrero (1996). This scale contained four subscales that correspond with the four attachment dimensions. Seven items measured *security/confidence* (e.g., "I am confident that other people will like me"); six items measured *dismissiveness* (e.g., "If something needs to be done, I prefer to rely on myself instead of working with others"); nine items measured *preoccupation* (e.g., "Sometimes others seem reluctant to get as close to me as I would like"); and five items measured *fear of intimacy* (e.g., "I tend to not take risks in relationships for fear of getting hurt or rejected"). Participants responded to all

attachment items using a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree).

**Equity.** Following Sprecher (1986) equity was measured using two items. The first item from Hatfield, Traupmann, and Walster (1979) was “who is getting a “better deal” considering what you put into your romantic relationship compared to what you get out of it, and what your romantic partner puts into the romantic relationship compared to what s/he gets out of it?” (1 = I am getting a much better deal than my partner, 4 = I am getting the same deal as my partner, 7 = I am getting a much worse deal than my partner). The second item from Sprecher (1986) was “consider all the times when the exchange in your romantic relationship has become unbalanced and one partner contributed more than the other for a time. When your relationship becomes unbalanced, which of you is more likely to be the one who contributes more” (1 = My partner is much more likely to be the one to contribute more, 4 = We contribute the same amount, 7 = I am much more likely to be the one to contribute more). The two items were significantly correlated with one another,  $r(201) = .54, p < .001$

To create equity groups, scores for each item were first recoded into one of three equity groups (i.e., scores of 1, 2, and 3 = overbenefitted group and was coded 0; score of 4 = equity and was coded 2; and 5, 6, and 7 = underbenefitted and was coded 3). Then, the recoded scores for the two items were summed to create an equity index (range = 0 to 6). Only participants who reported the same equity group for both equity items were retained for hypothesis testing (i.e., summed scores of 0, 4, or 6). Of the 102 participants whose scores reflected the same equity group for both items, 26 (25.5%) participants



reported being overbenefitted, 38 (37.3%) reported being in an equitable relationship, and 38 (37.3%) reported being underbenefitted.

**Transgression prompt.** Participants were presented with the following prompt to help them identify a relational transgression to focus on when completing subsequent measures of transgression severity and forgiveness-granting strategies: “Think back to a time when your partner committed a relational offense (e.g., lying, infidelity, ignoring you, etc.) and write a brief paragraph describing the nature of the offense.” This prompt was used solely to prime participants’ memories; the written descriptions will not be reported herein.

**Transgression severity.** Kelley and Waldron’s (2005) three-item transgression severity scale measured participants’ perception of the seriousness of their partner’s transgression. A sample item is “At the time they occurred, how severe did you consider your partners’ actions?” Participants responded to the severity items using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = less severe, damaging, or threatening, 7 = more severe, damaging, or threatening).

**Forgiveness-granting strategies.** Waldron and Kelley’s (2005) 13-item multidimensional forgiveness-granting scale measured the strategies participants used to grant forgiveness following their partner’s transgression. The *nonverbal* subscale consisted of four items (e.g. “I gave my partner a look that communicated forgiveness”), the *conditional* subscale consisted of two items (e.g. “I told my partner I would forgive him/her only if things changed”), the *minimizing* subscale consisted of three items (e.g. “I told my partner not to worry about it”), the *discussion* subscale consisted of two items (e.g. “I initiated discussion about the offense”) , and the *explicit* subscale was measured using a single global item (e.g. “I told my partner that I forgave them”). The participants

rated how often they used a given behavior when forgiving their partner using a 7-point scale (0 = no use, 7 = extensive use).

**Relationship satisfaction.** Hendrick's (1988) relationship assessment scale measured relationship satisfaction. Sample items include "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship" and "How well does your partner meet your needs" Participants responded to the items using a 7-point Likert-type scale with item appropriate anchors (e.g., 1 = not at all satisfied, 7 = very satisfied).

## CHAPTER V

### RESULTS

#### 5.1 Preliminary Analyses

Several preliminary analyses were conducted prior to conducting the main analyses. First, the relationships between several demographic variables (i.e., age, relationship length, biological sex, relationship status, racial/ethnic group, and sexual orientation) and the dependent variables (i.e., forgiveness strategies) were investigated to determine whether any demographic variables should be controlled for during hypothesis testing. Correlation tests revealed that relationship length and age were significantly and negatively related to the minimizing forgiveness strategy,  $r(207) = -.19, p < .01$  and  $r(209) = -.16, p < .05$  respectively. No other forgiveness strategies were significantly related to relationship length or age. A series of one-way ANOVAs revealed significant differences among relationship status groups for the discussion strategy [ $F(5, 205) = 2.28, p < .05$ ], the explicit strategy [ $F(5, 205) = 2.71, p < .05$ ], and the conditional strategy [ $F(5, 205) = 2.61, p < .05$ ]. Based on the inspection of number of cases per

relational status category and past literature, relationship status was dummy coded into two groups (non-married coded as 0 and married coded as 1). Finally, there were no significant differences found in any of the forgiveness strategies as a function of race/ethnic group, biological sex, or sexual orientation.

Second, Pearson's correlations were calculated among the independent and dependent variables. As shown in Table 3, the significant correlations ranged in magnitude from .14 to .59. Four of the six correlations among the attachment dimensions were significant, in the expected directions, and ranged in size from .43 to .59. Seven of the ten correlations among the forgiveness strategies were significant, positive, and ranged in size from .14 to .57. Relational satisfaction was significantly related to three of the five forgiveness strategies (range = .19 to .31), whereas transgression severity was significantly related to four of the five forgiveness strategies (range = .15 to .39). See Table 3 for a more detailed report of the intercorrelations among the variables examined in this study.

## **5.2 Main Analyses**

**Attachment dimensions and forgiveness granting strategies.** Hypotheses One through Five were tested with hierarchical multiple regression analyses using blocked entry of predictors. When appropriate, control variables were entered into the first block and attachment dimensions were entered into the second block. See Table 4 for detailed statistical information for Hypotheses One through Five.

Hypothesis One predicted that participants' use of the discussion strategy would have a positive relationship with security/confidence and a negative relationship with preoccupation, dismissiveness, and fear of intimacy. Relationship status was entered in

Model 1 as a control variable,  $F(1, 209) = 1.85, p > .05, R^2 = .01$ . Adding the attachment dimensions in Model 2 did not result in a significant increase in variance accounted for in the discussion strategy,  $\Delta F(4, 205) = .64, p > .05, \Delta R^2 = .02$ . Thus, Hypothesis One was not supported.

Hypothesis Two predicted that participants' use of the explicit strategy would have a positive relationship with security/confidence and preoccupation and a negative relationship with dismissiveness and fear of intimacy. Relationship status was entered in Model 1 as a control variable,  $F(1, 209) = 4.90, p < .05, R^2 = .02$ . Adding the attachment dimensions Model 2 resulted in a significant increase in variance accounted for in the explicit strategy. The attachment dimensions accounted for an additional 5% of variance in participants use of the explicit strategy following their partner's transgression,  $\Delta F(4, 205) = 2.72, p < .05, \Delta R^2 = .05$ . Dismissiveness explained a statistically significant amount of unique variance and was negatively related to the use of the explicit strategy ( $\beta = -.17, p < .05, sr^2 = .02$ ). Though the relationships between (a) security/confidence, preoccupation, fear of intimacy and (b) the explicit strategy use were in the predicted directions, they did not account for any unique variance in the explicit strategy use. Thus, Hypothesis Two was only partially supported.

Hypothesis Three predicted that participants' use of the minimizing strategy would have a positive relationship with security/confidence, preoccupation, and fear of intimacy, and a negative relationship with dismissiveness. To test Hypothesis Three relationship length and age were entered in Model 1 as control variables,  $F(2, 204) = 3.80, p < .05, R^2 = .04$ . Adding the attachment dimensions in Model 2 did not result in a significant increase in variance accounted for in the minimizing strategy,  $\Delta F(4, 200) =$

1.42,  $p > .05$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .03$ . As predicted, the minimizing strategy had a significant positive relationship with preoccupation ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $sr^2 = .02$ ), but did not have a significant relationship with security/confidence, dismissiveness, and fear of intimacy. Thus, Hypothesis Three was only partially supported.

Hypothesis Four predicted that participants' use of the nonverbal strategy would have a positive relationship with security/confidence, preoccupation, and fear of intimacy and a negative relationship with dismissiveness. The attachment variables accounted for approximately 12% of the variance in the use of the nonverbal strategy,  $F(4, 206) = 6.94$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .12$ . As predicted, the nonverbal strategy had a significant positive relationship with preoccupation ( $\beta = .34$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $sr^2 = .07$ ) and a significant negative relationship with fear of intimacy ( $\beta = -.31$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $sr^2 = .04$ ), but was not significantly related to security/confidence or dismissiveness. Thus, Hypothesis Four was only partially supported.

Hypothesis Five predicted that participants' use of the conditional strategy would have a positive relationship with dismissiveness, and a negative relationship with security/confidence, preoccupation, and fear of intimacy. To test Hypothesis Five, relationship status was entered in Model 1 as a control variable,  $F(1, 209) = 1.59$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $R^2 = .01$ . Adding the attachment dimensions in Model 2 resulted in a significant increase in the variance accounted for in the conditional strategy,  $\Delta F(4, 205) = 2.57$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .05$ . The conditional strategy had a significant positive relationship with security/confidence ( $\beta = .23$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $sr^2 = .03$ ) and fear of intimacy ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $sr^2 = .03$ ). Thus, Hypothesis Five was only partially supported.

**Equity and forgiveness granting strategies.** A series of one-way ANOVA tested Hypotheses Six through Ten. When follow-up tests were required to determine the source of the group differences, Tukey's post hoc test was consulted to determine the source of differences among equity groups. See Table 5 for more detailed statistical information than presented herein.

Hypothesis Six predicted that there would be differences in use of the discussion strategy among equity groups. A one-way ANOVA was not significant. The use of the discussion strategy did differ among equity groups,  $F(2, 99) = 3.32, p < .05$ . Thus, Hypothesis Six was supported. Equity group explained approximately 6% of the variance in participants' use of the nonverbal forgiveness strategy ( $\eta^2 = .06$ ). A Tukey's HSD post hoc test was consulted to determine the source of the mean differences detected by the ANOVA. The underbenefitted group ( $M = 6.45, SD = 1.69$ ) reported significantly greater use of the discussion strategy than the equitable group ( $M = 5.33, SD = 2.38$ ). The post hoc test did not reveal any other group differences.

Hypothesis Seven predicted that there would be differences in use of the explicit strategy among equity groups. A one-way ANOVA was not significant. The use of the explicit strategy did not differ among equity groups,  $F(2, 99) = .31, p > .05$ . Thus, Hypothesis Seven was not supported.

Hypothesis Eight predicted that there would be differences in the use of the minimizing strategy among equity groups. A one-way ANOVA was not significant. The use of the minimizing strategy did not differ among equity groups,  $F(2, 99) = 2.25, p > .05$ . Thus, Hypothesis Eight was not supported.

Hypothesis Nine predicted that there would be differences in the use of the nonverbal strategy among equity groups. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference in use of the nonverbal strategy among equity groups,  $F(2, 99) = 7.24, p < .01$ . Thus, Hypothesis Nine received support. Equity group explained approximately 13% of the variance in participants' use of the nonverbal forgiveness strategy ( $\eta^2 = .13$ ). A Tukey's HSD post hoc test was consulted to determine the source of the mean differences detected by the ANOVA. The equitable group ( $M = 4.77, SD = 2.21$ ) reported significantly greater use of the nonverbal strategy than the underbenefitted group ( $M = 3.78, SD = 1.94$ ). The post hoc test did not reveal any other group differences.

Hypothesis Ten predicted that there would be differences in the use of the conditional strategy among equity groups. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference in use of the conditional strategy among equity groups  $F(2, 99) = 3.21, p < .05$ . Thus, Hypothesis Ten was supported. Equity group explained approximately 6% of the variance in participants' use of the conditional forgiveness strategy ( $\eta^2 = .06$ ). A Tukey's HSD post hoc test was consulted to determine the source of the mean differences detected by the ANOVA. The underbenefitted group ( $M = 4.33, SD = 2.48$ ) reported significantly greater use of the conditional strategy than the equitable group ( $M = 3.79, SD = 2.67$ ). The post hoc test did not reveal any other group differences.

#### **Transgression severity, relational satisfaction, and forgiveness strategies.**

Correlation analyses tested Hypothesis Eleven and Hypothesis Twelve. When appropriate, partial correlation tests were conducted to partial out the variance in the dependent variable from control variables previously identified in the preliminary



analysis section. If no variables were controlled for, simple Pearson's correlations were used.

Hypothesis Eleven predicted that transgression severity would have a negative relationship with the nonverbal strategy, the minimizing strategy, and the explicit strategy, and a positive relationship with the discussion strategy and the conditional strategy. The result of a Pearson's correlation test was significant and it revealed a slight, negative relationship between transgression severity and the use of the nonverbal strategy,  $r(210) = -.16, p < .05$ . Transgression severity also demonstrated a significant and small negative relationship with the use of the minimizing strategy (controlling for relationship length and age), Partial  $r(202) = -.37, p < .001$ , a small, positive relationship with the use of the discussion strategy (controlling for relationship status), Partial  $r(207) = .38, p < .001$ , and a moderate, positive relationship with the use of the conditional strategy (controlling for relationship status), Partial  $r(207) = .35, p < .001$ . Transgression severity was not significantly related to the explicit strategy (controlling for relationship status), Partial  $r(207) = -.01, p > .05$ . Thus, Hypothesis Eleven was supported for four of the five forgiveness strategies.

Hypothesis Twelve predicted that relationship satisfaction would have a positive relationship with the nonverbal, minimizing, discussion, and explicit strategies and a negative relationship with the conditional strategy. The result of a Pearson's correlation test was significant and demonstrated a significant and small, positive relationship with the nonverbal strategy,  $r(202) = .31, p < .001$ . Relationship satisfaction also demonstrated a slight, positive relationship with the minimizing strategy (controlling for relationship length and age), Partial  $r(195) = .19, p < .01$ , and a small, positive

relationship with the use the explicit strategy (controlling for relationship status) Partial  $r$  (199) = .27,  $p < .001$ . Relationship satisfaction was not significantly related to the conditional strategy (controlling for relationship status), Partial  $r$  (199) = -.11,  $p > .05$  or the discussion strategy (controlling for relational status), Partial  $r$  (199) = -.03,  $p > .05$ . Thus, Hypothesis Twelve was supported for three of the five forgiveness strategies.

## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION

Guided by the VSA model, the current study examined the impact of vulnerabilities (i.e. attachment dimensions and relationship equity) and stress (i.e., transgression severity) on participants' use of various forgiveness strategies following a romantic partner's relational transgression. Furthermore, the relationship among forgiveness strategies and an important relational outcome, relational satisfaction, was also examined. Many of the predicted relationships between the attachment dimensions, equity, and the five forgiveness strategies were not confirmed by the data (See Table 6 for a summary of the results of the hypotheses). The few significant findings do provide insight into how vulnerabilities such as attachment dimensions and relational equity impact how individuals communicate forgiveness following a partner's relational transgression. Similarly, the confirmed relationships between forgiveness strategies, transgression severity, and relational satisfaction suggest that not only is forgiveness communication impacted by individuals' perceptions of the severity of their partner's transgression, their communication is also related to satisfaction in important ways. The

following sections further discuss the findings of the study and address the scholarly implications of these results.

### **6.1 Vulnerabilities: Attachment and Equity**

As outlined by the VSA vulnerabilities play a major role in determining how individuals interpret stressful events, communicate within their relationships, and how they adapt to challenges. This study specifically examined an individual based vulnerability (attachment) and a relationally based vulnerability (equity) to see how they would affect the way an individual communicated forgiveness in their relationship when they were faced with a stressful event (i.e., a romantic partner's relational transgression).

To begin, this study examined the relationships among the four attachment dimensions (i.e., vulnerability) and the five forgiveness strategies. In line with previous research that has demonstrated the utility of attachment in understanding individuals' general tendency to forgive romantic partner transgressions (Kachadourian et al., 2004) the results of the current study suggest that attachment may be useful in understanding some of the forgiveness communication strategies. Together, the attachment dimensions accounted for a significant amount of variance in participants' use of the explicit strategy, the nonverbal strategy, and the conditional strategy, but they did not account for a significant amount of variance in the discussion or minimizing strategies. The connections between the attachment dimensions and how individuals choose to communicate forgiveness to offending partners appears more complicated than suggested in the literature. Attachment is an individual vulnerability and whether an individual decides to forgive or not is an individual decision. However, the manner in which individuals' communicate forgiveness may be partially determined by their expectations

regarding how their partner will respond to a particular forgiveness strategy. As evidenced by the results of this study, those expectations are partially influenced by attachment dimensions, but other factors such as past behavior (both self and partner) and communication skills likely impact forgiveness communication decisions. Though the attachment dimensions as a group accounted for little or no significant variance in the five forgiveness strategies examined, several attachment dimensions demonstrated significant relationships with specific forgiveness strategies that are further discussed below.

As predicted, dismissiveness was negatively related to participants' use of the explicit strategy to communicate forgiveness. Dismissiveness is characterized by a positive view of self and a negative view of other. Consequently, dismissives are likely less inclined to explicitly communicate forgiveness following a transgression. As dismissive individuals tend to be overly independent and attempt to avoid intimacy (Bachman & Bippus, 2005), they would be less likely to provide the clear and concise message of forgiveness that is characterized by the explicit strategy (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Furthermore, as dismissives tend to be more concerned about their own needs than their partner's, they may be more concerned with coping with their own perceived betrayal than assuaging their partner's guilt by explicitly offering forgiveness to their partner.

Preoccupation, which is characterized by a positive view of other (they desire closeness and intimacy) and a negative view of self, was positively related to communicating forgiveness using the minimizing and nonverbal strategies as predicted. Preoccupieds have a strong fear of being abandoned, gain personal validation through their romantic relationships and place their partner in high regard. Using more indirect forgiveness strategies like the minimizing and nonverbal strategies allows preoccupieds

to avoid confrontation (Exline & Baumeister) and preserve the relationship with their partner. Moreover, the minimizing strategy can also be used as an attempt to not embarrass or humiliate a partner (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Given preoccupieds concern for partner (and lack of concern for self), the minimizing and nonverbal strategies provide them outlets that communicate their forgiveness in ways that don't shame the partner or threaten the face of the partner, as opposed to other strategies such as the explicit, conditional, and discussion strategies that either necessitate an interaction about the transgression and/or implicates the partner in wrong doing.

Fear of intimacy, characterized by a negative view of self and other, demonstrated significant relationships with two of the five forgiveness strategies. However, both relationships were in the opposite direction than hypothesized. First, contrary to expectations, fear of intimacy was negatively related to individuals' use of the nonverbal strategy. Fear of intimacy was predicted to be positively related to communicating forgiveness nonverbally because it is viewed as an indirect strategy that doesn't require discussion of the issue that could result in a fearful individual feeling rejected if the offending partner isn't willing to discuss the issue or validate the betrayed partner's perception of the transgression. However, previous research on attachment and trait affection provides a logical explanation for this finding. Specifically, fear of intimacy is negatively related to trait affection (both given and received) (Hesse & Trask, 2014). Though Waldron and Kelley (2005) conceptualize the nonverbal forgiveness strategy as indirect, the operationalization of the strategy as the action of hugging or touching a partner to communicate forgiveness could certainly be perceived as direct by an individual who is fearful of rejection and potentially uncomfortable with affection.

Second, also contrary to my prediction, fear of intimacy was positively related to the conditional strategy. Fearfuls tend to view their partners as being cold and indifferent to their problems. Thus, fearfuls may use the conditional strategy and attach stipulations to their forgiveness to prevent their partner from being indifferent toward their feelings following the transgression.

Finally, as predicted, security/confidence was positively related to communicating forgiveness conditionally. Security/confidence is characterized by a positive view of self and other. Secures value intimacy and autonomy and generally view romantic partners as trustworthy and dependable. Since secures don't have a tendency to fear rejection from others (Kachadourian et al., 2004) they may feel confident in communicating forgiveness conditionally and making demands on the partner to "earn" their forgiveness because they are confident in their relationship and their partner's ability to meet the conditions set for forgiveness.

This study also examined the relationships between relational equity (i.e., vulnerability) and the five forgiveness strategies. Significant group differences existed between equity groups for the nonverbal, discussion, and conditional strategies. There was a significant mean difference in participants' use of the nonverbal strategy between individuals in equitable relationships and individuals in underbenefitted relationships. Underbenefitted individuals were less likely to use the nonverbal strategy probably because underbenefitted individuals already tend to feel angry about putting more into the relationships than they receive (Sprecher, 2001a). Thus, underbenefitted individuals may be loath to offer affection to their partner after a transgression.

Previous research concerning equitable relationships revealed that underbenefitted individuals may use forgiveness in an attempt to restore their relationship back to equity (Fisher et al., 1983). Thus, it's logical to predict that underbenefitted individuals may be more inclined to use the conditional strategy than individuals in an equitable relationship as a way of restoring equity in the relationship. By setting conditions on forgiveness, an underbenefitted individual may be able to reach a compromise with his/her partner to restore the relationship to equity.

As the discussion strategy had a significant positive relationship with perceived severity, it also makes sense that underbenefitted individuals would be more likely to use the discussion strategy. A relational transgression may make underbenefitted individuals feel like their relationship is becoming even more inequitable, which will likely lead to increased feelings of distress and strengthen their resolve to restore the relationship to equity (Hatfield & Traupmann, 1981). Thus, the addition of a relational transgression to an already inequitable relationship may lead to the underbenefitted individual initiating a discussion about the transgression and most likely the relationship as a whole.

## **6.2 Stress: Transgression Severity**

As described by the VSA, stressful events are defined as “the developmental transitions, situations, incidents, and chronic or acute circumstances that spouses and couples encounter” (Karney & Bradbury, 1995, p. 22). The occurrence of stressful events in a relationship is inevitable and therefore it is imperative to understand how individuals react to a stressful event or circumstance within their relationship. This study specifically examined how individuals used forgiveness strategies as an adaptation when faced with the stress of a relational transgression. As predicted, transgression severity had a



significant negative relationship with participants' use of the nonverbal and minimizing strategies. These findings are logical because as the severity of a transgression increases an individual should be less likely to attempt to trivialize or minimize the transgression or to simply grant forgiveness nonverbally without addressing the serious nature of the transgression. Also as predicted, transgression severity had a significant positive relationship with participants' use of the discussion and conditional strategies. Severe transgressions should lead individuals wanting to either discuss the transgression or make changes to the relationship to ensure that such a serious transgression doesn't occur again in the future. The results of this study are closely aligned with those reported by Merolla (2008) and Sheldon et al. (2014). The lack of a significant relationship between transgression severity and the explicit strategy matches the findings of Sheldon (2014).

### **6.3 Relational Satisfaction**

As stated previously, the way in which romantic couples adapt to stressful events plays a major role in determining relational outcomes (Langer et al., 2008). This study specifically examined the relationship between participants' use of forgiveness strategies (adaptations) and their relational satisfaction (relational outcomes). Relational satisfaction had a significant positive relationship with participants' use of the nonverbal, minimizing, and explicit strategies. Sheldon et al. (2014) reported similar results when he found that relationship satisfaction had a positive relationship with participants' use of the nonverbal and minimizing strategies in married couples and a positive relationship with participants' use of the explicit strategy in dating couples. Individuals who are satisfied in their relationships could be more likely to use the nonverbal, minimizing, and explicit strategies because they feel as if there is really no need for their partner to seek

forgiveness. Thus, they may want to minimize the transgression, not talk about it at all, or forgive their partner as quickly as possible to move past the transgression. The lack of a relationship between relational satisfaction and the discussion strategy closely mirrors the results found by Sheldon et al. (2014).

#### **6.4 Scholarly and Practical Implications of the Findings**

This study is significant in that it furthers our understanding of how individuals use forgiveness strategies as an adaptation when faced with preexisting vulnerabilities and stressful events in their relationships. This study also advances our understanding of the role attachment plays in the communication of forgiveness. Previous studies have demonstrated how the attachment dimensions affect the tendency to forgive, but have not focused on the specific forgiveness strategies used. Finally, this study advances our understanding of the role that equity plays in the communication of forgiveness.

From a practical standpoint, this study demonstrated the negative effect stressors have on relational satisfaction. Thus, when faced with a stressful event, it becomes imperative that couples use forgiveness strategies that are demonstrated to have a positive relationship with relational satisfaction. Furthermore, this study demonstrated how individuals in each attachment dimension can use particular forgiveness strategies to increase their relational satisfaction. This could have implications for couples in relationship counseling because it could help individuals from a particular attachment dimension understand the ways both themselves and their partners are likely to use to communicate forgiveness after a relational transgression.

## **6.5 Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The current study is limited by several factors. First, the reliability of the scale that measured dismissiveness was low, which may have impacted the results of the study. Second, only one member of the romantic relationship was recruited to participate in this study. Future research can expand our knowledge of the relationships among the variables reported herein by examining the perceptions of both members of the romantic relationship. For instance, knowing how the offending partner falls on the attachment dimensions could inform our understanding of the betrayed partner's forgiveness communication. Third, the study was cross-sectional and relied on individuals' report of their forgiveness communication in reference to a single transgression. Since individuals may select different forgiveness strategies at different times and in response to different relational transgressions, a longitudinal study would be better suited to capture the dynamics of forgiveness communication. Asking participants to recall a transgression and how they communicated forgiveness is a limitation that may even occur during a longitudinal study because of retrospective sense making. The nature of the individual's relationship at the time of report could impact how he/she remembers the transgression and the forgiveness that follows. This could lead to the individual reporting a transgression as better or worse than it actually was based on how they feel about the relationship at the time of the report. Though recall biases are present in all self-report research, future researchers might investigate the utility of using a diary method and asking individuals to complete measures immediately after experiencing the transgression. Fourth, since some of the attachment dimensions were correlated at low level and entered into the same block of the regression models multicollinearity could be a

concern for those analyses. However, a review of the collinearity diagnostics show suggest that multicollinearity like did not impact the results of the analyses. Finally, due to the limited amount of research involving the VSA model future research is warranted. The VSA model was designed to examine marital relationships, but there is potential in expanding the model to encompass other types of relationships including sibling relationships, parent/child relationships, and possibly even the relationship between an individual and an organization. In addition, the VSA allows for different variables to be entered into each part. Thus, there are a myriad of possibilities for different vulnerabilities, stressors, and adaptations. A possible limitation and a possibility for future directions is that this study did not address the potential for cultural and religious differences when it came to the communication of forgiveness since forgiveness is likely tied to both cultural and religious beliefs. Future studies could also look more closely at the relationship between sexual orientation and the communication of forgiveness. This study did not find significant differences between sexual orientation groups, but a larger sample would be needed to fully address differences in sexual orientation groups. Finally, a possible limitation of this study is the possibility of a priming issue in the survey. The survey listed potential example relational transgressions as lying, infidelity, and ignoring. This could have influenced participants' selection of the specific transgression they reported on. However, a cursory review of the written descriptions of the transgression suggests that participants reported on a variety of different kinds of transgressions, rather than just the three examples provided in the prompt. Nevertheless, future studies could adjust the prompt to encompass a broader range of potential transgressions to avoid concern regarding a priming bias.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

Based on the inevitability of a relational transgression occurring at some point during a romantic relationship, it is imperative to understand how individuals forgive after a transgression is committed. It is also important to understand possible factors that can affect how individuals communicate forgiveness because the way an individual communicates forgiveness has an impact on his/her relational satisfaction. In conclusion, this study demonstrated how vulnerabilities (attachment and equity) stressors (transgression severity), and adaptations (forgiveness communication) come together to predict relational outcomes (relational satisfaction).

Figure 1. The Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model (VSA)

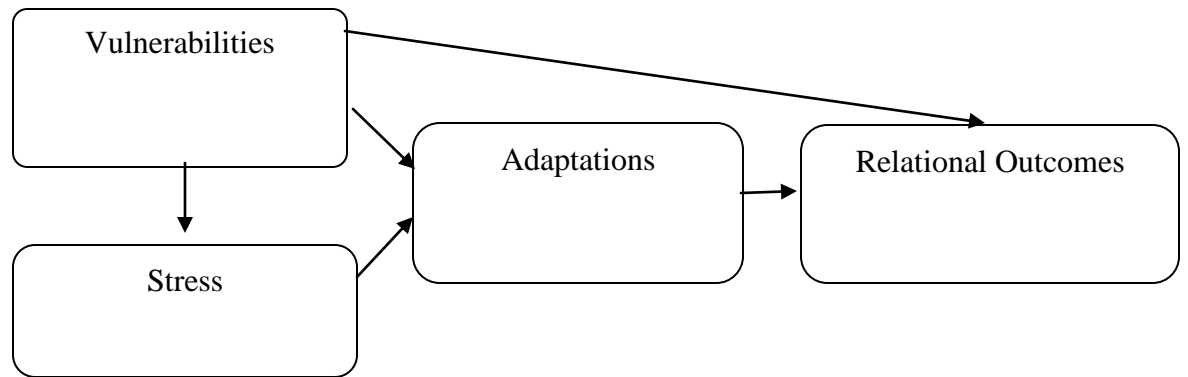
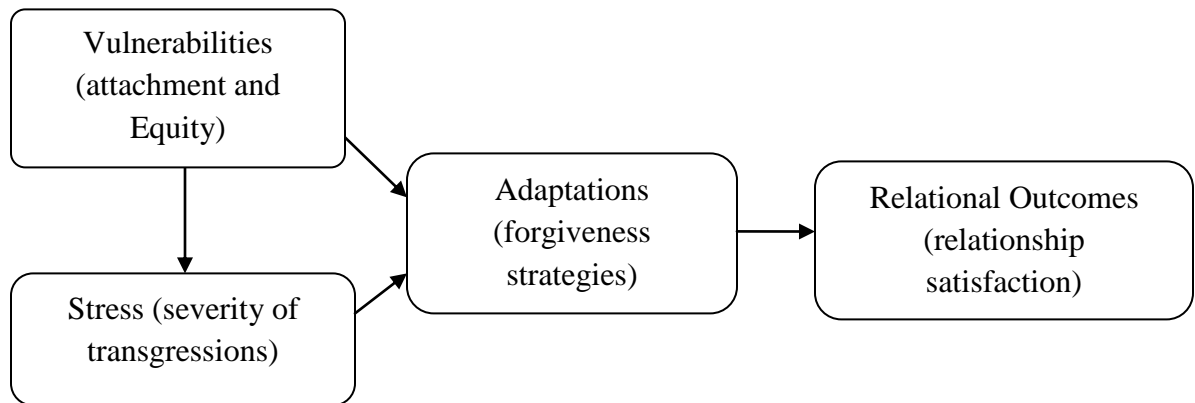


Figure 2: Application of VSA Model in Current Study



Note. The direct relationship between vulnerabilities and relational outcomes specified in the original VSA model was not examined in this study due to previously demonstrated robust findings in the literature that establish the relationship between relationship satisfaction, attachment dimensions, and equity.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

|                                   | <i>n</i> | %    |
|-----------------------------------|----------|------|
| Marital Status                    |          |      |
| Single                            | 6        | 2.8  |
| Dating                            | 111      | 52.4 |
| Engaged                           | 17       | 8.0  |
| Married                           | 71       | 33.5 |
| Divorced                          | 2        | .9   |
| Other                             | 5        | 2.4  |
| Racial/Ethnic Group               |          |      |
| White, not Hispanic or Latino     | 147      | 69.3 |
| White, Hispanic or Latino         | 12       | 5.7  |
| Black or African American         | 20       | 9.4  |
| Asian                             | 6        | 2.8  |
| Middle Eastern                    | 17       | 8.0  |
| Native American or Alaskan Native | 3        | 1.4  |
| Other                             | 7        | 3.3  |
| Sexual Orientation                |          |      |
| Heterosexual or Straight          | 183      | 86.3 |
| Gay or Lesbian                    | 4        | 1.9  |
| Bisexual                          | 21       | 9.9  |
| Other                             | 4        | 1.9  |
| N = 212                           |          |      |



Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliability Coefficients for Measures

|                         | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>α</i> |
|-------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Attachment Dimensions   |          |           |          |
| Security/Confidence     | 3.97     | .89       | .84      |
| Dismissive              | 3.47     | .74       | .64      |
| Fearful                 | 3.24     | 1.12      | .84      |
| Preoccupied             | 3.64     | .75       | .70      |
| Equity                  | 4.16     | 1.16      | .70      |
| Transgression Severity  | 4.12     | 1.99      | .94      |
| Forgiveness Strategies  |          |           |          |
| Discussion              | 6.07     | 1.92      | .82      |
| Explicit                | 5.04     | 2.31      | N/A      |
| Minimizing              | 3.25     | 1.98      | .80      |
| Nonverbal               | 4.73     | 2.04      | .86      |
| Conditional             | 3.80     | 2.37      | .76      |
| Relational Satisfaction | 5.81     | 1.12      | .91      |

Note. The explicit forgiveness strategy is a one-item scale, therefore a reliability coefficient could not be calculated.

Table 3. Pearson's Correlations among Independent and Dependent Variables

|                               | 1      | 2      | 3      | 4      | 5     | 6      | 7     | 8     | 9     | 10   |
|-------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| Attachment Dimensions         |        |        |        |        |       |        |       |       |       |      |
| 1. Security/Confidence        | ---    |        |        |        |       |        |       |       |       |      |
| 2. Dismissive                 | -.13   | ---    |        |        |       |        |       |       |       |      |
| 3. Fearful                    | -.59** | .43**  | ---    |        |       |        |       |       |       |      |
| 4. Preoccupied                | -.50** | -.05   | .55**  | ---    |       |        |       |       |       |      |
| Forgiveness Strategies        |        |        |        |        |       |        |       |       |       |      |
| 5. Nonverbal                  | .07    | -.21** | -.17*  | .15*   | ---   |        |       |       |       |      |
| 6. Minimizing                 | .02    | -.01   | .03    | .13    | .45** | ---    |       |       |       |      |
| 7. Discussion                 | -.03   | -.10   | -.08   | -.01   | .24** | -.09   | ---   |       |       |      |
| 8. Conditional                | .11    | .01    | .08    | -.03   | .12   | .04    | .23** | ---   |       |      |
| 9. Explicit                   | .07    | -.24** | -.13   | .05    | .57** | .30**  | .27** | .14*  | ---   |      |
| 10. Relationship Satisfaction | .27**  | -.27** | -.37** | -.20** | .31** | .19**  | -.03  | -.12  | .28** | ---  |
| 11. Transgression Severity    | -.20** | .01    | .19**  | .07    | -.15* | -.37** | .36** | .39** | -.05  | -.36 |

Notes. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

Table 4. Regression Models Predicting Forgiveness-Granting Strategies

| Models   | <i>B</i> | <i>SE<sub>B</sub></i> | $\beta$ | <i>t</i> | <i>sr</i> <sup>2</sup> |
|--|----------|-----------------------|---------|----------|------------------------|
| <b>H<sub>1</sub> Discussion</b>                        |          |                       |         |          |                        |
| Model 1: $F(1, 209) = 1.85, R^2 = .01$                 |          |                       |         |          |                        |
| Relationship Status                                    | .38      | .28                   | .09     | 1.36     | .01                    |
| Model 2: $\Delta F(4, 205) = .64, \Delta R^2 = .02$    |          |                       |         |          |                        |
| Relationship Status                                    | .23      | .30                   | .06     | .75      | .00                    |
| Security   | -.20     | .19                   | -.09    | -1.05    | .01                    |
| Dismissiveness   | -.15     | .22                   | -.06    | -.66     | .00                    |
| Fearful  | -.16     | .19                   | -.10    | -.87     | .00                    |
| Preoccupied  | .01      | .23                   | .00     | .02      | .00                    |
| <b>H<sub>2</sub> Explicit</b>                          |          |                       |         |          |                        |
| Model 1: $F(1, 209) = 4.90, R^2 = .02^*$               |          |                       |         |          |                        |
| Relationship Status                                    | .74      | .33                   | .15*    | 2.21     | .02                    |
| Model 2: $\Delta F(4, 205) = 2.72, \Delta R^2 = .05^*$ |          |                       |         |          |                        |
| Relationship Status                                    | .45      | .35                   | .09     | 1.27     | .01                    |
| Security   | .16      | .22                   | .06     | .73      | .00                    |
| Dismissiveness   | -.51     | .26                   | -.17*   | -2.00    | .02                    |
| Fearful  | -.13     | .22                   | -.06    | -.61     | .00                    |
| Preoccupied  | .37      | .27                   | .12     | 1.35     | .01                    |
| <b>H<sub>3</sub> Minimizing</b>                        |          |                       |         |          |                        |
| Model 1: $F(2, 204) = 3.80, R^2 = .04^*$               |          |                       |         |          |                        |
| Relationship Length                                    | -.00     | .00                   | -.16    | 1.57     | .01                    |
| Age  | -.01     | .02                   | -.03    | -.31     | .00                    |
| Model 2: $\Delta F(4, 200) = 1.42, \Delta R^2 = .03$   |          |                       |         |          |                        |
| Relationship Length                                    | -.00     | .00                   | -.16    | -1.53    | .01                    |
| Age  | -.01     | .02                   | -.03    | -.29     | .00                    |
| Security   | .21      | .19                   | .09     | 1.06     | .01                    |
| Dismissiveness   | -.02     | .23                   | -.01    | -.08     | .00                    |
| Fearful  | -.09     | .20                   | -.05    | -.47     | .00                    |
| Preoccupied  | .52      | .25                   | .20*    | 2.12     | .02                    |
| <b>H<sub>4</sub> Nonverbal</b>                         |          |                       |         |          |                        |
| Model 1: $F(4, 206) = 6.94, R^2 = .12^*$               |          |                       |         |          |                        |
| Security   | .11      | .19                   | .05     | .57      | .00                    |
| Dismissiveness   | -.14     | .22                   | -.05    | -.64     | .00                    |
| Fearful  | -.57     | .19                   | -.31**  | -3.04    | .04                    |
| Preoccupied  | .93      | .24                   | .34**   | 3.94     | .07                    |
| <b>H<sub>5</sub> Conditional</b>                       |          |                       |         |          |                        |
| Model 1: $F(1, 209) = 1.59, R^2 = .01$                 |          |                       |         |          |                        |
| Relationship Status                                    | -.44     | .35                   | -.09    | -1.26    | .01                    |
| Model 2: $\Delta F(4, 205) = 2.57, \Delta R^2 = .05^*$ |          |                       |         |          |                        |
| Relationship Status                                    | -.34     | .37                   | .23     | -.92     | .00                    |
| Security   | .60      | .23                   | .23*    | 2.58     | .03                    |
| Dismissiveness   | -.34     | .27                   | -.11    | -1.29    | .01                    |
| Fearful  | .61      | .23                   | .29**   | 2.68     | .03                    |
| Preoccupied  | -.28     | .28                   | -.09    | -1.00    | .00                    |

Notes.  $p < .05^*, p < .01^*$ . Relationship status was dummy code so that 0 = non-married and 1 = married.

Table 5. Results of One-Way ANOVAs Examining Differences in Forgiveness Granting Strategies Among Equity Group

|             | Equity Group           |                          |                          | <i>F</i> |
|-------------|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------|
|             | Overbenefitted         | Equity                   | Underbenefitted          |          |
|             | <i>n</i> = 26          | <i>n</i> = 38            | <i>n</i> = 38            |          |
|             | <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) | <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )   | <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )   |          |
| Discussion  | 6.29 (1.86)            | 5.33 (2.38)              | 6.45 (1.69)              | 3.32*    |
| Explicit    | 5.19 (2.02)            | 5.18 (2.47)              | 4.82 (2.35)              | .31      |
| Minimizing  | 2.94 (1.99)            | 3.71 (2.48)              | 2.69 (1.94)              | 2.25     |
| Nonverbal   | 4.77 (2.21)            | 5.57 (2.05) <sub>a</sub> | 3.78 (1.94) <sub>b</sub> | 7.24**   |
| Conditional | 3.79 (2.67)            | 3.13 (2.21) <sub>a</sub> | 4.33 (2.48) <sub>b</sub> | 3.21*    |

Notes.  $p < .05^*$ ,  $p < .01^{**}$ ;  $df$  for all tests = 2, 99. Means in the same row with the different subscripts are significantly different from each other.

Table 6. Summary of Support Found for the Study Hypotheses.

| Hypothesis   | Results   |
|--|---|
| H <sup>1</sup> : The discussion strategy will have a positive relationship with security/confidence and a negative relationship with preoccupation, dismissiveness, and fear of intimacy | Not supported   |
| H <sup>2</sup> : The explicit strategy will have a positive relationship with security/confidence and preoccupation and a negative relationship with dismissiveness and fear of intimacy | Supported for dismissiveness  |
| H <sup>3</sup> : The minimizing strategy will have a positive relationship with security/confidence, preoccupation, and fear of intimacy and a negative relationship with dismissiveness | Supported for preoccupation   |
| H <sup>4</sup> : The nonverbal strategy will have a positive relationship with security/confidence, preoccupation, and fear of intimacy and a negative relationship with dismissiveness  | Supported for preoccupation.<br>Negative relationship with fear of intimacy |
| H <sup>5</sup> : Conditional forgiveness will have a positive relationship with dismissiveness and a negative relationship with security/confidence, preoccupation, and fear of intimacy | Positive relationship with security/confidence and fear of intimacy         |
| H <sup>6</sup> : There will be differences in the use of the discussion strategy among equity groups.  | Supported   |
| H <sup>7</sup> : There will be differences in the use of the explicit strategy among equity groups.  | Not Supported   |
| H <sup>8</sup> : There will be differences in the use of the minimizing strategy among equity groups.  | Not Supported   |
| H <sup>9</sup> : There will be differences in the use of the nonverbal strategy among equity groups.   | Supported   |

H<sup>10</sup>: There will be differences in the use of the conditional strategy among equity groups.

Supported

H<sup>11</sup>: Transgression severity will have a negative relationship with the nonverbal strategy, the minimizing strategy, and the explicit strategy, and a positive relationship with the discussion strategy and the conditional strategy.

Supported for non-verbal, minimizing, discussion, and conditional

H<sup>12</sup>: Relationship satisfaction will have a positive relationship with the nonverbal, minimizing, discussion, and explicit strategies and a negative relationship with the conditional strategy.

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Supported for minimizing, non-verbal, and explicit

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